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Close losses leave Grafton baseball team searching for answers down home stretch

Baseball left the Grafton Black Hawks singing the one-run blues.

After winning three of their five previous games, the Hawks lost three straight by the slimmest of margins last week, capped by a 7-6 heartbreaker against Port Washington on June 28.

A shaky start by his team and a short-circuited rally in the bottom of the seventh inning left Grafton coach Brian Durst shaking his head.

“It was a really, really tough loss,” said Durst, whose squad committed five errors and had the bases loaded with no outs in the final inning before failing to score the tying run in a sweltering North Shore Conference battle.

“This kind of game left us with a bad taste at the end of a tough week. We lost three games we knew we should have won.”

To their credit, the Hawks recovered from a 7-1 deficit to make a game of it on Parents Night.

After Port starter Derek Haley retired 12 straight batters from the second through fifth innings, Grafton broke through in the sixth. Choo Weisflog reached on an infield error and eventually scored on Beau Benzschawel’s groundout.

Things got especially interesting in the Hawks’ seventh.

After Haley hit Will Birch with a pitch to start the inning, Brett Rasmussen and Bryan Sternig both walked to load the bases.

Tim Grams's base hit off reliever Taylor Devenport drove in a run, and Weisflog's two-run single made it 7-5. When Robbie Doring's bunt single was thrown away, another run scored and the Hawks had two men in scoring position.

Alex Nennig was intentionally walked to reload the bases, but Devenport retired the next three hitters — Benzschawel on a pop-up, Kevin Scholz on a grounder played into a force-out at home and Birch on a groundout.

The loss was the Hawks' fourth straight and left them 5-10 in conference play and 8-12 overall.

"We had a great comeback and a great chance to win it at the end. But the game was really lost much earlier," Durst said.

"We just made too many mistakes in the early innings. That's what we talked about with our team afterward."

For Port coach Nicholas Wycklendt, the game provided a much-needed lift, giving the Pirates their second win in their last nine tries.

"It got a little bit nerve-racking at the end, but we were able to hang on for a great win," said Wycklendt, whose team improved to 5-9 in NSC play and 8-14 overall.

"Our kids deserve some credit for being able to pull it out. It's a tribute to how hard they've been working all season."

Port did all of its scoring in the first three innings, starting with three runs in the opening frame against Nate Lukas. Two Grafton errors brought in one run, and Max Kaske's two-run double made it 3-0.

After Grafton got one run back on Scholz's RBI single in the first, Port scored four unanswered runs.

A throwing error gave the Pirates a run in the second, and five singles in the third made it 7-1. Mitchell Schmidt, Mitch Bartlein and Kiley Prellwitz each had RBI hits.

Haley got the win with six innings of work, striking out three and walking two.

Lukas took the loss after pitching the first 2-2/3 innings.

Durst praised the relief work of Rasmussen, a junior who threw shutout ball in the final four innings.

"Brett really stepped up and kept us in it," Durst said. "He was the one who extended the game

when Port could have broken in open."

Bartlein led the Pirates at the plate by going 3-for-5, and Devenport had two hits. Doring had two hits for Grafton.

Germantown 5, Grafton 4

A run-scoring wild pitch in the seventh inning foiled the Black Hawks' comeback in a seesaw conference game June 28.

Host Grafton trailed, 4-1, after four innings before rallying to pull even with a three-run fifth.

Sternig started the comeback with a walk, and Weisflog followed with a one-out single. When a ground ball hit by Doring was thrown away, one run scored.

Nennig drove in another run with a fielder's-choice groundout, and the tying run came home when a grounder hit by Benzschawel was misplayed.

In the seventh, Germantown used a bloop single, throwing error on a sacrifice bunt and wild pitch to regain the lead for good.

"We fell behind early, but we played good baseball to get back in the game," Durst said.

Alex Anderson pitched a complete game for the win. He struck out five and walked two.

The loss went to Rasmussen, who worked the final 2-1/3 innings in relief of starter Bryce Fisk.

Weisflog had two of Grafton's four hits. Germantown had nine hits, including two apiece by Jimmy Doedens, Brian Keller and Jordan Kuszynski.

The win improved the Warhawks to 11-2 in conference games, two games ahead of second-place West Bend West in the loss column.

This week, Grafton was scheduled to conclude the regular season with three games — Monday against Homestead, Tuesday against Nicolet and Thursday with a 5:30 p.m. contest at West Bend East.

The Black Hawks will then open WIAA regional play July 5.

Image Information: GRAFTON FIRST BASEMAN Beau Benzschawel had trouble handling an errant throw that allowed Port Washington's Nick Godersky to reach during a North Shore Conference game. Photo by Sam Arendt